Different strokes for different folks: group variation in employee outcomes to human resource management

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Purpose

Existing research on the relationship between human resources management (HRM) and employee outcomes rarely explores differences between employee groups and their receptiveness to HRM initiatives.

Design/methodology/approach

Using data from a single case organisation, the authors examine whether HRM practices applied uniformly across strategically distinct employee groups have differing influence on commitment, motivation and satisfaction of these groups.

Findings

Using occupational identity, the results indicate that different groups of employees have varied perceptions of, and reactions to, the same HRM practices.

Originality/value

The paper argues that existing theory and practice advocating universal or high potential HRM as a route to positive employee outcomes is potentially flawed. HRM ought rather to be tailored to the different specific utility needs of diverse occupational categories.

Keywords: Universal HRM, employee groups, work typologies, occupational identity, employee outcomes.

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Introduction

Scholars and practitioners remain preoccupied with the alleged link between HRM and performance outcomes (Brewster *et al*., 2016), yet the relevance of specific HRM bundles of practices to different categories of workers employed by a firm is still largely neglected (Boxall *et al*., 2011; Kinnie *et al*., 2005). This article seeks to address this gap by assessing the impact of HRM practices on employee outcomes, comparing different employee occupational groups in a single organisation. At the start of this century, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argued the need for a better understanding of identity dynamics. While substantial progress has been made in the intervening years, there is still much to learn. Framed by social identity and group identity theories, and contributing to our understanding of identities in the workplace, this article asks 'do distinct employee groups experience and react to HRM practices in a uniform manner?' In doing so we span the domains of HRM research and identity research. Den Hartog *et al*. (2013) suggest that incorporating multiple employee perspectives about the impact of HR practices on performance outcomes could facilitate a more accurate reflection of organisational reality. Attention towards employee interests has pointed to more detailed enquiry on the mediating effects of HRM practice configurations that give a more central role to employees in the equation (Heffernan and Dundon, 2016). Such an approach would take cognisance of specific occupational identities evident in the workplace (Skorikov and Vondracek, 2011) rather than treating employees as an undifferentiated mass (Jiang *et al*., 2017). Extant research reveals that employee perspectives on HRM are more important in predictive terms than managerial perspectives (Kehoe and Wright, 2013; Lepak *et al*., 2012).

In this paper, we address a gap in the research on HRM systems and employee outcomes by considering how different employee groups within a single organisation experience a uniform HRM system. As Nishii and Wright (2007, p.5) have argued: "we have hitherto failed to explicitly recognise the many ways in which individuals and groups may experience and

respond differentially to HR systems within organizations". By explicitly focusing on employee commitment, motivation and satisfaction, we make a direct contribution to this literature by showing that diverse groups of employees experience and react to HRM system differently (Boxall *et al*., 2011). Assessing variance across employee groups is not a new phenomenon (Kinnie *et al*., 2005; Lee *et al*., 2019; Riketta and VanDick, 2005). However, research has generally focused on variance in perceptions of HRM (Nishii and Wright, 2007) and the demographic determinants of such perceptions (Jiang *et al*., 2015), as opposed to variance in outcomes experienced by diverse groups subject to a uniform HRM configuration (Jackson and Schuler, 1995). This raises a very important question to further understanding of HRM: do employee groups subject to a uniform HRM system experience it differently and react in diverse ways, and if they do, can we explain why? Jiang *et al*. (2017) posit that variance in perceptions of HRM is indicative of the strength of the HRM system. We contend the opposite: that a truer reflection of system strength would be indicated by little variance in the outcomes workers experience, owing to the proximity between intended practices and actual or experienced outcomes. Contemporary understanding of employment group identity is primarily derived using items such as class consciousness (Lockwood, 1989), ethnicity (Martinez-Lucio and Perrett, 2009), gender (Kamenou and Fearfull, 2006), occupational or knowledge status (Marks and Baldrey, 2009) and group level support (Tremblay *et al*., 2019), as opposed to using more natural or salient groupings evident within an actual workplace (Riketta and VanDick, 2005), such as operators, technicians or supervisors. Most prior research has superimposed theoretical typologies upon workplaces irrespective of natural demarcations evident in those workplaces (see for example Kinnie *et al*., 2005; Lepak and Snell, 2002).

We contribute to the literature by providing an explanation of differences between groups in respect of recalibrating the value/ uniqueness proposition of Lepak and Snell (1999, 2002) and in suggesting that perceptions of, and reactions to, HR practices are not what is commonly

assumed. The research suggests that those who would be classified as peripheral or non-strategic workers have better experiences of, and reaction to, HRM over and above that of their core or strategic counterparts. In practical terms this article suggests that applying a uniform HRM system to all employees can result in very different and sometimes unintended outcomes. In the next section we review the application of identity theory (Stryker and Burke, 2000) to establishing different employee groups. We then describe the methodological design and research context, before presenting the findings. Finally, we discuss the main issues pertaining to the HRM-performance link along with the limitations and possibilities for future research.

Identity, workgroup classification and differentiation

Within the workplace focussed stream of social identity theory research there is growing interest in how people construct and negotiate social class, professional roles, their space and place of work, and organisational based characteristics (see for example, Coupland, 1999; Watson, 2009). Watson (2008) also argues that people strive to shape a coherent notion of self-identity and sometimes struggle with various social influences that pertain to them. The social group can be more important than individual identity in certain contexts (see for example, discussion of healthcare professionals in Currie et al, 2010).

When people operate within their workplace there are socially prescribed organisational identities available to them, but such identities are not compulsory or forced upon individuals (Brown, 2014). Furthermore, while it is possible that identities can shift and evolve, there is a degree of temporal coherence to identity over time and space, often linked to earlier notions of craft and skill lineage. Given that people can progress through their working lives to different groups within professions as well as organisations, this poses a dilemma for HRM. If there is group variation in employee outcomes of HRM, how is this manifest over time as identities change with movement through these organisational groups? While this question poses an

interesting dilemma for HRM practitioners, we do not have the scope within this article adequately to explore answers.

There is considerable debate in extant literature regarding the type and number of HRM practices that are believed to enhance performance. Most studies treat HRM initiatives as applying universally across all employees in an organisation (Boselie *et al*., 2005; Edgar and Geare, 2005), implying homogeneity across different occupational groups, which ignores important distinctions within the workforce (Li *et al*., 2019). To deal with this limitation, Osterman (1987) distinguished four groups of workers: industrial (blue collar); salaried (white collar); craft (professionals); and secondary (agency workers), each with their own respective group identity. Lepak and Snell (2002) regard worker classification by developing configurations of HRM practices consisting of four roles: knowledge-based work; job-based employment; contractual task arrangements; and partnerships. However, most organisations do not neatly correspond with such predefined employee categories, and these are rarely static (Chen and Tang 2018; Stryker and Burke, 2000). The notion of the boundaryless career suggests that employees will rotate in different roles, with blurred job demarcations leading to more precarious work under financialised modes of capitalism (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010).

There is both individual and organisational variance in attribution to particular predefined occupational groups (Lepak and Snell, 2002). While identity and identification in the workplace are intimately connected with formal roles (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007), Brown (2015, p. 23) argues there is "an emergent consensus that *identity* refers to the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves". HRM investment in "core" or "strategic" groups of workers prevails in eliciting positive outcomes compared with such investment in "peripheral" or "non-strategic" workers (Björkman *et al*., 2013). Importantly, because predefined group classifications are divided along set parameters, occupational classifications of blue *vs* white collar, or manual *vs* clerical, employees may not always make organisational

sense. It is possible that there is a degree of dissonance between idealised worker classifications and employee self-identification within organisations, and also how this identity can be socially constructed (Lyons *et al*., 2019). Brown (2019) notes that where occupational groups have featured in studies of identity, these are typically centered on traditional managerial or professional identities. Nevertheless, attempts have been made to address the complexity of actual settings through establishing "context-specific typologies of identities" (Brown, 2019, p. 11), which is the approach we adopt.

Our contribution draws on social identity theory and specifically occupational identity to explain potential variance in perception across different groups of workers (Phelan and Kinsella, 2009). Amongst others, Stets and Burke (2000) suggest that group identity is a socially driven phenomenon, comprising a cognitive element (knowledge of being a group member), an affective facet (emotional group attachment), and an evaluative component (the value outsiders put on group membership). Occupational Identity suggests, "participation in occupation contributes to one's construction of identity and is the primary means to communicate one's identity" (Phelan and Kinsella, 2009, p. 85). Noting that "the nature of an occupation is tied to the social identities with which it is aligned" Ashcraft (2013, p. 6) makes a distinction between "identity *at* work" and "identity *from* work". The former includes "how individuals relate to group identities … how people construct a sense of self at work … and how organizations shape individual entities", while the latter is concerned with "the relation between self and *occupation*" (Aschcraft, 2013, p. 10). This sense of identity with an occupational group is how we employ the use of employee categories, notwithstanding Ashcraft's claim that there is no "robust conception of occupational identity" (p. 10). Christensen (1999) set four conditions for occupational identity as a concept. Firstly, that identity is shaped by relationships. Secondly, identity is formed by interpreting relationships

with others. Thirdly identities are for providing meaning to everyday events. Finally, as meaning is derived from identity, identity is critical in promoting organisational wellbeing.

Stryker and Burke's (2000) identity theory is concerned with "who one is", whereas occupational identity is more concerned with "what one does" (Thoits and Virshup, 1997). The German concept of *Beruf* (Gehmlich, 2009) is usually translated as profession or vocation, and encapsulates occupational identity (Winterton, 2009, p. 686), which was recently employed effectively by MacKenzie and Marks (2018) in exploring the employment transitions of telecommunications engineers. Occupational identity assists understanding of the interpretation of HRM initiatives on three levels. Firstly, employees identify to their selves on a personal level, often according to their job or career role (Kinnie and Swart, 2012). Secondly, on a social level, individuals manifest commitment to co-workers, a team or management (Cafferkey *et al*., 2017; Osterman, 1987). Finally, identity theory applies to HRM through identification with and commitment to an organisation (Meyer and Allen, 1997). Lamenting the lack of empirical studies investigating identities and their interactions between individuals, groups and organisations, Brown (2015, p. 33) suggests one explanation is "that identity is often employed as a descriptive category rather than as an analytical tool." We use the occupational groups as categories both for description and for analysis of responses to HRM initiatives.

We are interested here in advancing understanding at the group level, where members of different employee groups might experience different outcomes to a uniform HRM system. It is already known that different employee groups can experience HRM differently (Jiang *et al*., 2017), but little has been reported specifically concerning why different employee groups react differently to the same HRM system. A key focus of this paper is to explore how, and to explain why specific groups react in different ways to a uniform HRM system.

From the perspective of investment in certain bundles of HRM, there is considerable debate as to whether organisations should adopt universal or differential strategic approaches by focusing more on one group of workers (e.g. core and high-potential) than another (e.g. low-skill and peripheral) (Kelly *et al*., 2011). Jiang *et al*. (2017) report different employee reactions to HRM practices due to demographic dissimilarity with co-workers and management. We build on this by proposing further that specific employee groups, evident in all organisations (such as general operatives, technicians etc.) have specific job identities which bring about a collective inter-group identity (Hogg *et al*., 1995). Gould-Williams and Davis (2005) contend that through social information processing, group members collectively interpret and rationalise management intentions about HRM in a way that makes sense to that particular group. Kelly (1999) further argues that a collectivised worker identity can emerge over a perceived work-related injustice, resulting in a collective workforce response. It is, therefore, feasible to suggest that specific employee groups would react to HRM initiatives differently, as they collectively make sense of HRM practices. In adopting this approach, we draw on the work of Lepak and Snell (1999) who introduced the concept of HR architecture (see Figure 1). An implication here is that universal or uniform HRM investment covering "all" employees equally, may actually prove to be disadvantageous to organisations (McClean and Collins, 2011) because HRM systems should be designed to reflect the variable roles and identities that particular employee groups add to the organisation (Lepak and Snell, 1999). It is problematic, therefore, that research results tend to be aggregated into a single HRM system covering all employees (Guthrie, 2001) without paying attention to differences between occupational groups. If employees have varying degrees of strategic value to an organisation and differ in terms of the uniqueness of their skill sets, it is logical to infer that they each have specific utility needs with respect to HRM.

Our contention is that once occupational identities are established, they become self-enforcing through saliency and similarity, which then evolve into role expectations (Stryker and Burke, 2000). The idea of using different HRM configurations to achieve performance gains is not new (Albrecht *et al*., 2015). Lepak *et al*. (2003) suggest there may be performance implications in managing employees differently, advocating potential human capital advantage in terms of uniqueness of approach for core and non-core employees. In contrast, research assessing the outcomes experienced under a uniform HRM system have not being forthcoming. Variations in HRM practices have been suggested since Osterman's (1987: 47) view that similar outcomes can be achieved under very different "employment subsystems", but two weaknesses are apparent with much research in this area. First is an overwhelming unitarist bias that leads to neglect of inherent dialectic antagonisms in the effort-reward exchange where an unrealistic "one team, one dream" mantra exists (Cafferkey *et al*., 2017). Second is the assumption of homogeneity in treating all employees as an undifferentiated mass. With heterogeneous groups the contradictions of aggregating upwards or across occupations becomes apparent, particularly in respect of managerial versus employee categorisations: if a particular employee group is not subject to a certain HRM practice, one cannot conclude that such a practice influences that group. Unfortunately, aggregation does not acknowledge such obvious omissions. Ideologically, there is almost an assumption that all employees morph into organisational citizens with little recognition of employment relationship tensions, ambiguities or plurality (Geare *et al*, 2014). Our intention is to address the plurality, in respect of the outcomes in relation to a uniform HRM system.

Research Methodology and Setting

Context

This paper draws on research from a single case study of a multinational pharmaceutical organisation in Ireland ("PharmaCo"). PharmaCo was carefully selected on the basis that it mirrored a so-called high performing best practice HRM model (e.g. in terms of reported policies such as sophisticated recruitment and selection, extensive employee voice, performance-related pay, training and development) and it employed different categories of work groups (e.g. manual operators, professional, technical staff) making it possible to explore variations in employee outcomes across different employee groups experiencing a common HRM system. The categorisation and number of employee groups was derived from the actual occupational classifications operating in PharmaCo, reflecting an "organisational reality" in the research design. This is sometimes referred to as methodological pluralism or a contextualised approach (Piekkari *et al*., 2008).

The focus on a single case makes it possible to minimise the influence of environmental differences associated with large-scale studies across multiple industries (Truss, 2001; Wright and Haggerty, 2005). Boxall *et al*. (2011) also note that the lowest level of disparity among HRM systems happens within one establishment of a single organisation. This consistency of HRM makes a single organisation more appealing to highlight differences between employee groups (Lepak *et al.,* 2006). The research was designed to facilitate rich contextualisation through assessing more accurate reflections of organisational reality (Boxall *et al*., 2011; Dyer and Wilkins, 1991) as opposed to idealised norms (Cafferkey *et al*., 2018). The research design sought to address the shortcomings of previous research, which typically has a) relied exclusively on management responses (Lepak and Snell, 2002); b) not compared employees in the same organisation (Conway and Monks, 2009); c) adopted idealised predefined typologies (Lepak *et al.,* 2003); and d) aggregated employees from different groups and industries (Kinnie *et al*., 2005). Our holistic approach set out to ascertain how different groups of employees experience and react to a universal HRM system in a single organisation.

Four separate employee work groups exist at PharmaCo: Supervisors; Technicians; Operators; and Professionals. Management interviews confirmed that supervisors and technicians were deemed "core" employees, whereas operators and professional employees were regarded as more "peripheral". Through qualitative enquiry, at managerial, front line manager (supervisor) and union official level, the four work categories were transposed onto the HR architecture as espoused by Lepak and Snell (1999, 2002) (see Figure 1). The research on which this paper is based did not seek to ascertain self-assigned identities but adopted the categorical identities ascribed by management and that are salient throughout the organization.

{{Place Figure 1 about here}}

Supervisors- *"Eyes and Ears"*. According to HRM interviews, supervisors are considered the most important group in PharmaCo in that their role in production is critical for success. This is the smallest group in PharmaCo, comprising 33 employees (6.2 per cent of all respondents) and commonly referred to as the "eyes and ears".

Technicians- *"A -Team"*. This is the second largest group, comprising 179 employees (33.8 per cent of all respondents). Technicians are generally considered to be scientists with very high educational requirements. Referred to as "the brains of the operation … the A-team".

Operators- *"Busy Bees"*. This group represented the largest category in the plant with 210 employees (39.6 per cent of all respondents). As the primary labour category these "busy bees" are involved in packaging and warehousing.

Professionals- *"Semi Pros"*. In total there were 107 employees in the professional category (20.2 per cent of all respondents). This group is referred to as the "semi pros" or support staff consisting of, for example, accountants and sales/marketing staff.

Data collection

The research was conducted at PharmaCo's flagship production facility in Ireland. All employees at the facility are subject to the same set of HRM practices.

The research involved a two-stage process, starting with management interviews (n=15): a) to recognise the natural salient employment categories at PharmaCo; and b) to identify the actual HRM practices present and their application to the various employment groups. After the initial managerial interviews a second batch of interviews were conducted with line managers (n=3) and trade union officials (n=3) to corroborate the overall picture presented in the management interviews. These interviews were arranged and conducted by the research team. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, with HR management interviews tending to be slightly longer. The interviewees included the CEO, Global HR Director, HRM director, three HRM staff (Employee Relations Manager, Recruitment and Training Manager, and Professional Recruitment Manager), and various directors across the operation (Quality Assurance, Operations, Warehousing, Financial Controller, Logistics and Sales). This process proved invaluable in gaining an accurate overview of what the HRM systems entailed.

Stage two involved an employee attitude survey (EAS) administered to all 604 non-managerial staff. After removing incomplete surveys 529 complete responses were retained, representing an achieved net response rate of 87.5 per cent. Personal biographic data were kept to a minimum to avoid individual employee identification (e.g. some groups had few or only one female which could compromise anonymity). Data were collected on working shift rotas, length of tenure, and employment category.

Measures

We developed our measures in consultation with management after following debates and concepts in the literature (Patterson *et al.*, 2005; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Truss, 2001). The precise phraseology of questions and statements were agreed and discussed with senior

management of the organisation (this was a condition of access). The reason for this reflected corporate linguistic form, occupational specificity and managerial preferences also to report on issues of concern to the organisation at the time, thereby adding an action research element to the findings. Buchanan *et al*. (1998) refer to this as the practical trade off when conducting case research. Therefore, statements were not replicated verbatim from prior studies, but the inclusion of practice areas (e.g. training etc.) was informed from reported research advances. For example, while Patterson *et al*. (2005) used "involvement", the term "communication" was used at the request of management to reflect organisational nomenclature. To this end, respondents would have a better appreciation of what was being asked of the HRM policy specific to their organisation and grade. On other items, such as "training and development", management preferred their own questions as they had used these in company surveys previously and this ensured respondents would be familiar with the linguistic form. Cronbach's Alpha was used to test the robustness of the measures, which were generally satisfactory. Respondents were at the same time assured of confidentiality and anonymity and that the research was for academic purposes and independent of senior management.

The practices consisted of Training and Development (T&D, α=0.77); Performance Management and Reward (PM&R, α=0.72); and Communication and Involvement (C&I, α=0.80). The T&D factor includes six items (e.g. "I received the necessary training"; "opportunities to learn"; and "my manager supports learning"), which were adapted from Boxall *et al*. (2011, p. 1518) and Patterson *et al*. (2005). Two additional items that factored together include "understanding work and personal balance" and "knowing what is expected of me". These were derived from a bank of questions PharmaCo management suggested, which were particular to in-house development programmes at the time. The Performance Management and Reward scale factored with two items based on statements used by Truss (2001, p. 1135), such as "pay is fair/good compared with other organisations" and "my efforts

are properly recognised and rewarded". The Communication and Involvement scale included five items (C&I, α = 0.80) adapted from Patterson *et al*. (2005, p. 406), including for instance "I generally feel well informed", "people in this organisation communicate" and "communications are adequate before decisions are taken" (see Appendix 1 for HRM questions).

Employee outcome measures include commitment (α = 0.62), satisfaction (α = 0.72) and motivation (α = 0.60) used in other related HR-performance studies (e.g. Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Godard, 2001). The scales used related to the sources listed in Appendix 1. In two instances the alpha coefficients did not reach the desirable level of 0.70, but lower coefficients can be deemed acceptable in a single case sample (Bernardi, 1994); others advise that coefficients as low as 0.6 may be acceptable (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1978).

Findings

Table 1 presents the results of the correlation analysis of the study variables. All HRM practices are strongly correlated with employee outcomes at the level $p<0.01$. This provides a useful starting point for the analysis and demonstrates a particularly useful data set for testing variances between groups of employees.

{{Place Table 1 about here}}

Variance between groups

The variance results are presented in Table 2 where a one-way ANOVA and Eta squared are calculated for each group (This is also done for individual questions in Appendix 1).

{{Place Table 2 about here}}

The harmonic mean was used to alleviate problems that may occur when comparing means of different sized groups. The analysis of variance for commitment indicated a significant difference across groups ($F=27.19$, $p\leq0.01$). The Eta squared indicates this difference to be

significant at 2 per cent across the groups. Post Hoc tests indicated significant differences between professionals (M=10.15, SD=2.65) and technicians (M=11.18, SD=3.03), and operators (M=10.30, SD=3.05) and technicians. In relation to satisfaction the analysis of variance again indicated a significant difference across groups (F=47.32, p≤0.01), with an Eta squared of 8 per cent. Post Hoc tests indicated significant differences between supervisors (M=6.90, SD=1.95) and both professionals (M=5.94, SD=2.07) and operators (M=5.33, SD=1.90). Professionals were also significantly different from operators and technicians (M=6.56, SD=1.93). Operators were also found to be significantly different from technical staff. Regarding motivation, the analysis of variance indicates a significant difference across the groups (F=3.03, p≤0.01) this difference is indicated to be significant at the one percent level. However, post Hoc tests did not indicate any significant difference between any two specific groups of employees.

To test the differences between groups the data file was split according to employee category and individual regression analysis was conducted for each group using a weighted average to lessen concerns regarding group sizes. The results are presented in Table 3. The effects of control variables were removed and the predictive value for each practice is presented. Post Hoc tests also identified the groups with significant differences and a calculation of Eta squared examined the extent of difference between groups on a particular variable.

{{Place Table 3 about here}}

Commitment: For supervisors, regression analysis reveals that after removing the effect of control variables only T&D (β=0.56, p≤0.05) significantly predicts commitment. The model explains 60.4 per cent of variance (F(5, 32)=25.25, p≤0.01). For professional employees T&D (β=0.41, p≤0.01) and PM&R (β=0.29, p≤0.01) significantly predict commitment. The model explains 47 per cent of variance (F(5, 106)=30.54, p≤0.01). For operations staff T&D (β=0.43,

p≤0.01) and C&I (β=0.33, p≤0.01) predicted 52 per cent of variance (F(5, 209)=80.57, p≤0.01). In relation to technical staff T&D (β=0.55, p≤0.05) and C&I (β=0.27, p≤0.01) explain 58 per cent of the variance (F(5, 178)=63.41, p≤0.01).

Satisfaction: For supervisors, after removing the effect of control variables only C&I (β=0.63, p≤0.05) significantly predict satisfaction. Management stressed that "Communication *is* involvement... the more you talk to them, the happier they are; it's a trust issue". The model explains 46 per cent of variance (F(5, 32)=19.46, p≤0.01). For professional employees T&D (β=0.29, p≤0.01) and C&I (β=0.52, p≤0.01) significantly predict satisfaction. The model explains 63 per cent of variance (F(5, 106)=39.38, p≤0.01). For operations staff T&D (β=0.35, p≤0.01), PM&R (β=0.23, p≤0.01), and C&I (β=0.28, p≤0.01) predicted 51 per cent of variance (F(5, 209)=97.97, p≤0.01). In relation to technical staff T&D (β=0.28, p≤0.01), PM&R (β=0.11, p≤0.5), and C&I (β=0.49, p≤0.01) explain 59 per cent of the variance (F(5, 178)=55.53, p≤0.01).

Motivation: For supervisors, regression analysis reveals that after removing the effect of control variables, no HR practice significantly predicts motivation. For professional employees PM&R (β=0.45, p≤0.01) and C&I (β=0.26, p≤0.01) significantly predict motivation. The model explains 59 per cent of variance in motivation (F,(5, 106)=37.49, p≤0.01). For operations staff T&D (β=0.41, p≤0.01), and PM&R (β=0.38, p≤0.01) predict 36 per cent of variance (F(5, 209)=48.08, p≤0.01). In relation to technical staff T&D (β=0.35, p≤0.01), and PM&R (β=0.43, p≤0.01) explain 37 per cent of the variance (F(5, 178)=28.64, p≤0.01).

Discussion

The results demonstrate that employee experiences of HRM are a function of employee group identity, as suggested by identity theory. The evidence presented confirms that employees do not experience the same outcomes arising from a common HRM configuration. These results

contrast with the understanding in mainstream HRM research and reinforce the importance of differentiated HRM practices and the need to capture the employees' role in debates about HRM and performance. The findings raise several implications for both the theory and practice of HRM.

Homogeneity and HRM

First, employee reactions to HRM practices are important and can be more pronounced (more positive) for employees categorised as "peripheral" compared to counterpart groups defined by management as "core". This finding directly builds on previous research by McClean and Collins (2011) and Lepak *et al.* (2003), who advocate focusing HRM investment on selective organisational members aligned to core organisational goals. Our research also builds upon the work of Kinnie *et al*. (2005), who looked at large employee groupings where homogeneity was viewed in a broad sense by addressing explicitly defined and, in this instance, universally understood employment categories. The results indicate that when analysis is conducted on distinct employee groups, alternative implications emerge. Our research design utilised more proximal outcome measures than previous studies, so the implied linkages should be more apparent and pronounced (Gardner *et al.*, 2001). This was indeed the case, but the relationships did not follow the assumed theoretical path. The predictive strength of HRM practices varied greatly, and for some groups, individual practices had no significant predictive value (see Table 3). T&D can be said to be the most important of HRM practices across all employment groups in prediction of all employee outcomes, followed by C&I and finally PM&R, yet the importance varied when the analysis was broken down to separate categories of employees. Our research provides strong support for the suggestion by Kinnie *et al.* (2005) that occupational bundles of HRM practices for specific employee groups is warranted, which could be enhanced by the deployment of identity theory in establishing appropriate employee groups in specific contexts.

Perceptions of HRM

Second, a distinct pattern is evident in terms of perceptions of HRM practices (see Appendix1): supervisors in all instances reported the lowest level of agreement with HRM practice statements, followed by technicians, professionals and finally operators (except in one instance for C&I, where operators and professional staff switched places). *Post hoc* tests confirmed the significant divergence in opinions regarding HRM practices. This builds on previous research by Kinnie *et al.* (2005), who suggest that a "one size fits all" approach may not be desirable. One possible explanation is that with increased devolution of HRM activities, supervisors may feel overburdened and may resent the increased workload and associated pressure (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). This may lead to supervisors not implementing organisational intentions, whether actively or unintentionally. McGovern *et al*. (2007) point out that while line managers are personally motivated in their role as HRM agents, this does not necessarily imply that they are capable of carrying out such HRM activities.

Reactions to HRM

Third, in relation to employee outcomes, the two groups deemed most critical to the functioning of the organisation according to management – supervisors and technicians – reported the lowest levels of commitment, satisfaction and motivation. Both groups displayed a detachment and a lack of meaningful involvement and identification with the organisation (Rees *et al*., 2013). Professionals reported the lowest levels of commitment and motivation and the second lowest levels of satisfaction. One explanation, articulated by Kinnie and Swart (2012), is that professionals can be more committed to their professional body than their employer. Operations staff share a similar position to professionals in relation to employee outcomes. It is possible that the mundane nature of their work may explain why operatives feel isolated or

lack a coherent voice to exercise their views. Pass (2005) suggests it is reasonable to assume that operators may feel undervalued in an organisation and any semblance of involvement should potentially increase their self-esteem and perceptions of organisational value.

Unrealistic dichotomies and typologies

Fourth, a further disparity is evident in relation to the dichotomy proposed by Lepak *et al.* (2003) because categorising employees as core or peripheral to delivering organisational objectives (c.f. strategic or non-strategic) is found wanting. The theoretical proposition, on a perceived value basis that HRM investment and return on HRM resource allocation is more applicable to core employees, is unfounded in this instance. A possible explanation is that HRM practices alone may be insufficient for certain groups because they have different needs and wants that may be explicable in terms of their specific occupational identities (Lopez-Cabrales *et al*., 2006).

Finally, the research found that while significant differences existed between employee groups in relation to outcomes, operators with less responsibility were more satisfied in their role and enjoyed, through constant interaction, a social inter-group affiliation (O'Reilly *et al*., 1991), a level of interpersonal trust (Lau and Liden, 2008), group cohesion and pro-social behaviour (Katz and Khan, 1978). The counter-intuitive finding that less strategic groups were more positive about HRM initiatives could be explained by the likelihood that any attention to their needs would probably be a novelty compared with the more strategic groups who would expect (demand) to be managed "properly".

The discussion of the findings addresses three levels of contributions: individual identity at the self/personal level; team identity at the occupational level; and organisational identity as espoused by HRM. The outcomes of HRM configurations or bundles are not uniform or homogenous, and significant variance is found across occupational groups.

Practical implications

From a practical perspective this research has highlighted for practitioners the apparent pitfalls of introducing and managing a uniform HRM system that could potentially have a negative effect on employees and the organisation. In a similar vein, our understanding of how core employees are managed and how they react to HRM is flawed. Our findings suggest that HRM works for the entire employee population up to a particular point, after which any marginal benefit for core employees experiences diminishing returns. In managerial terms good people management is critical for ensuring high levels of employee outcomes all the time, whereas core employees would, it appears, require a rather more bespoke HRM system. This has implications in terms of resource allocation because our research suggests HRM investment in the non-core population would potentially provide superior returns than the same investment in core workers. With this in mind we would urge caution in implementing a uniform HRM system irrespective of group considerations, and contend that aspiring to a "best practice" approach to uniform HRM is futile in terms of return on investment. A better approach would start from having a better understanding of the utility needs of different groups and adapt HRM systems accordingly.

Additionally, scholars and HR managers need to appreciate the nuances of evolving occupational identities and, importantly, how progression throughout a career places various social pressures on workers (Asaba and Jackson, 2011). Brown (2015) argues that there is still much to learn about how context influences identity and Alvesson (2010) engages with debates on the temporal nature of identities. Our findings demonstrate that there is significant variation between organisational work groups and, therefore, it is reasonable to deliberate over the way careers evolve and take workers at multiple hierarchical positions to different social constructs such that, over time, their identities evolve with new socially constructed expectations of work,

management power roles and positional authority. Hence, HRM cannot deliver static messages for workers throughout time.

Limitations

These research findings of course have limitations. Firstly, the research intentionally does not use previously validated scales of idealised HRM systems. Instead the authors specifically set out to measure the impact of the actual HRM system at PharmaCo as opposed to a predetermined list of what HRM systems ought to contain. Our approach is more contextualised, and the intention was never to generalise. Common method variance is often cited as a limitation in cross-sectional research (Lindell and Whitney, 2001). By specifically focusing on employees' perceptions there is no common variance issue with the present study. The focus on employee perceptions (of their experiences of HRM practices and the impact of these on their attitudes and behaviours) demands a common method. Spector (2006, p. 222) states that the rush to criticise common methods is somewhat exaggerated, which is supported by the meta-analysis of 581 studies by Crampton and Wagner (1994). Spector (2006) advises focussing on developing a methodological design that is fit for purpose and in this case subjective reports on perceptions of HRM practices and employee outcomes must come from the same individuals in order to explore the link.

Group sample sizes are also a potential limitation. As we used the entire actual population rather than a sample, we draw on a comprehensive data set of the entire actual setting, including supervisors in comparison to operators. We further used a weighted sample and harmonic means to allow comparisons for groups of different sizes. This is an inevitable problem of dealing with actual populations rather than samples of populations.

Future Research

Future research could take several different directions. Firstly, there is a need for further research to establish "occupational" identity more fully and independently of HRM as an established differentiator. Further work could explore the extent to which managerially ascribed categories are important for specific occupational groups in defining self at work. Studies that were designed to add to the debates around temporal identity development would be useful when tied to the notion of group variation in HRM outcomes. We posed a rhetorical question earlier in this article that we did not have the scope to answer – how is group variance manifest over time as identities change with an individual's movement throughout organisational groups? This question would require longitudinal data to provide an adequate answer.

Further research is also required to understand better the processes through which groups make social sense of HRM practices. The work of Bowen and Ostroff (2004) provides potential avenues to explore the messaging of HRM and its interpretation by different employee groups.

Conclusion

The findings question the validity of applying HRM practices uniformly across different employee groups and suggest that a configuration approach capable of addressing different social identities, employee perceptions, needs and wants is required. Group identity is important and therefore HRM should focus on recognising distinct identities based on occupations and employment sub-groups, rather than assuming workforce homogeneity with predicable behavioural outcomes. The research presented here suggests general operatives require more voice, supervisors are somewhat self-motivated, and professionals are potentially more committed to their profession than their employing organisation. The implications of these findings are that it may be necessary to manage the expectations of different employee groups with appropriate and distinctive work sub-systems.

Extending on such an approach it could be useful to analyse the same propositions in contexts where bespoke HRM systems are evident for various groups of employees. In conclusion, this research has illustrated the possible naivety of assuming that a uniform HRM configuration can be universally applied to all groups of workers within a single organisational setting, while at the same time expecting a similar attitudinal and behavioural response.

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Variable	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*
1. Shift	1								
2. Tenure	0.02	1							
3. Category	-0.10*	-0.07	1						
4. T&D	-0.31**	-0.14**	0.06	1					
5. PM&R	-0.28**	-0.15**	0.00	0.59**	1				
6. C&I	-0.25**	-0.17**	0.08*	0.79**	0.59**	1			
7. Commitment	-0.33**	-0.09*	0.06	0.77**	0.55**	0.72**	1		
8. Satisfaction	-0.27**	-0.18**	0.04	0.74**	0.59**	0.77**	0.63**	1	
9. Motivation	-0.31**	-0.10*	0.02	0.62**	0.65**	0.55**	0.63**	0.58**	1

Table 1. Pearsons Correlation of Study Variables

Note: n = 529; *p <0.05, ** p <0.01

Table 2. Analysis of variance of HR practices and employee outcomes

Variables	*Supervisors*		*Professionals*		*Operators*		*Technicians*		*Analysis of variance*	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	ANOVA	η2
T&D	13.57	4.52	11.68	3.17	11.39	3.63	13.00	3.39	F=27.19**	0.04
PM&R	7.57	2.31	7.18	2.28	6.96	2.32	7.35	2.04	F=3.79**	0.00
C&I	12.66	4.89	10.57	3.15	10.16	3.33	12.21	3.70	F=42.23**	0.07
Commitment	11.48	3.70	10.15	2.65	10.30	3.05	11.18	3.03	F=27.19**	0.02
Satisfaction	6.90	1.95	5.94	2.07	5.33	1.90	6.56	1.93	F=47.32**	0.08
Motivation	8.63	2.57	7.71	2.53	7.97	2.68	8.20	2.21	F= 3.03*	0.00

Note: n = 529; *p <0.05, ** p <0.01

Table 3. Hierarchical regressions for individual employment groups

		Commitment		
	Supervisors (n=33)	**Professionals** (n=107)	**Operators** (n=210)	**Technicians** (n=179)
Shift	β= -0.18	β= -0.34**	β= -0.35**	β= -0.25**
Tenure	β= -0.37**	β= -0.10	β= -0.11	β= 0.02
ANOVA	F= 4.23*	F= 7.56**	F= 16.45**	F= 6.01**
R^2	0.22	0.12	0.13	0.06
T&D	β= 0.56*	β= 0.41**	β= 0.43**	β= 0.55**
PM&R	β= -0.01	β= 0.29**	β= 0.10	β= -0.03
C&I	β= 0.37	β= 0.07	β= 0.33**	β= 0.27**
ANOVA	F= 25.25**	F= 30.54**	F= 80.57**	F= 63.41**
R^2	0.82	0.60	0.66	0.64
ΔR^2	0.60	0.47	0.52	0.58
		Satisfaction		
	Supervisors (n=33)	**Professionals** (n=107)	**Operators** (n=210)	**Technicians** (n=179)
Shift	β= 0.00	β= -0.03	β= -0.40**	β= -0.12
Tenure	β= -0.56**	β= -0.17	β= -0.18**	β= -0.07
ANOVA	F= 7.07**	F=1.66	F= 25.22**	F= 2.05
R^2	0.32	0.03	0.19	0.02
T&D	β= -0.13	β= 0.29**	β= 0.35**	β= 0.28**
PM&R	β= 0.29	β= 0.06	β= 0.23**	β= 0.11*
C&I	β= 0.63*	β= 0.52**	β= 0.28**	β= 0.49**
ANOVA	F= 19.46**	F= 39.38**	F= 97.97**	F= 55.53**
R^2	0.78	0.66	0.70	0.61
ΔR^2	0.46	0.60	0.51	0.59
		Motivation		
	Supervisors (n=33)	**Professionals (n=107)**	**Operators (n=210)**	**Technicians (n=179)**
Shift	β= 0.07	β= -0.21*	β= -0.41**	β= -0.28**
Tenure	β= -0.46*	β= -0.11	β= -0.09	β= -0.03
ANOVA	F= 3.75*	F= 3.06	F= 21.78**	F= 8.02**
R^2	0.20	0.05	0.17	0.08
T&D	β= 0.43	β= 0.16	β= 0.41**	β= 0.35**
PM&R	β= 0.34	β= 0.45**	β= 0.31**	β= 0.43**
C&I	β= -0.03	β= 0.26**	β= 0.00	β=-0.05
ANOVA	F= 7.47**	F= 37.49**	F= 48.08**	F= 28.64**
R^2	0.58	0.65	0.54	0.45
ΔR^2	0.38	0.59	0.36	0.37

Note: n = 529; *p <0.05, ** p <0.01

Appendix 1. Study variables and analysis of variance of individual questions

Variables (and sources)	*Supervisors*		*Professionals*		*Operators*		*Technicians*		*Analysis of Variance*	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	ANOVA	η_2
Training and Development(α=.77) (adapted from: Gutherie, 2001; Patterson et al, 2005; Boxall et al, 2011)										
I have received the necessary training to do my job effectively [a]	2.24	.751	1.68	0.93	1.60	0.67	2.18	0.86	F= 21.38**	0.11
I have opportunities at work to learn and grow [b]	2.58	1.12	2.09	0.97	2.10	1.04	2.23	0.96	F= 2.59*	0.02
My manager helps me to identify opportunities for my development [a]	2.61	1.27	2.35	1.12	2.43	1.22	2.45	1.040	F= 0.48**	0.00
I am able to maintain a reasonable balance between work and my personal life [a]	2.42	1.28	1.92	1.06	1.75	0.96	2.15	1.04	F= 7.25*	0.04
I am very clear of what is required of me in my job [a]	1.58	0.56	1.64	0.69	1.53	0.55	1.77	0.69	F= 4.64**	0.03
My job makes good use of my skills and abilities [b]	2.15	0.87	2.00	0.86	1.99	0.84	2.22	0.98	F= 2.67*	0.02
Performance Management and Reward(α=.72) (adapted from: Truss, 2001)										
My pay and benefits package is as good as in most organisations in this region [a]	2.85	0.97	2.67	1.10	2.67	1.19	2.74	1.12	F= 0.33	0.00
My achievements and efforts are properly recognised and rewarded [a]	2.67	1.19	2.45	1.10	2.40	0.93	2.36	1.00	F= 0.94	0.01
Communication and Involvement(α=.80) (adapted from: Patterson et al, 2005)										
I generally feel informed about matters that affect me [a]	2.63	1.19	2.12	0.90	1.88	0.73	2.58	1.05	F=21.73**	0.11
I am well informed about what is going on in the organisation as it affects me [a]	2.21	0.81	1.89	0.92	1.70	0.69	2.18	0.96	F=11.54**	0.06
People in this organisation communicate with each other very openly [a]	2.75	1.11	2.41	0.98	2.45	1.06	2.64	1.08	F=1.95	0.01
Adequate communications to employees take place prior to implementing new programs initiatives [a]	2.60	1.14	2.14	0.87	2.10	0.97	2.50	0.99	F=7.25**	0.04
The organisation is fair overall, in how it deals with people [a]	2.45	1.06	2.00	0.94	2.01	0.97	2.29	1.09	F=4.21**	0.02
Commitment(α=.62) (adapted from: Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007)										
I am proud to work in this organisation [a]	2.00	0.93	1.62	0.63	1.53	0.57	2.02	0.78	F=18.86**	0.09
I would recommend this organisation as a good place to work to a friend or relative [a]	2.09	1.23	1.97	0.87	2.12	0.94	2.05	0.83	F=0.66	0.00

My present job provides me with the opportunity to do challenging and interesting work [a]	2.21	1.21	2.31	0.91	2.22	0.92	2.36	0.96	F=0.78	0.00
I understand the consequences that may occur for the organisation as a result of not doing my job well [a]	1.75	0.56	1.54	0.53	1.56	0.56	1.59	0.56	F= 1.34	0.00
This organisation and its employees are committed to work hard to achieve high standards [a, b]	1.51	0.79	1.52	0.73	1.39	0.62	1.55	0.78	F= 1.85	0.01
Satisfaction(α=.72) (adapted from Godard, 2001)										
Compared to other companies, this is a good company to work for [a]	2.21	0.78	1.90	0.86	1.70	0.76	1.94	0.69	F= 6.34**	0.03
Overall I feel this organisation is well run [a]	2.24	0.75	1.78	0.80	1.55	0.66	2.10	0.85	F= 19.76**	0.10
I'm satisfied with my job and the kind of work I do [a]	2.45	0.90	2.25	1.01	2.07	0.86	2.50	0.92	F= 7.58**	0.04
Motivation /Discretionary Effort (α=.60) (adapted from Godard, 2001)										
I'm willing to put in extra effort to help this organisation be successful [a]	1.81	0.58	1.62	0.55	1.61	0.73	1.73	0.62	F= 1.78	0.01
The extra effort I put into my job is recognised [a, b]	2.33	1.53	2.07	1.20	2.34	1.28	2.19	1.25	F= 1.19	0.00
I am well motivated in my job [a]	2.81	1.10	2.37	0.98	2.34	1.03	2.54	1.05	F= 2.84*	0.01
I look forward to the challenges in my job [a, b]	1.66	0.77	1.64	0.64	1.66	0.68	1.72	0.58	F= 0.37	0.00

Note: n = 529; *p <0.05, ** p <0.01

Legends: (a) = adapted from source cited; (b) = suggested in consultation with PharmaCo management

Figure 1: The HR Architecture		
High Uniqueness	Alliance Partners (Idiosyncratic knowledge) Ideal: Collaborative HRM PharmaCo: **Professionals**	Knowledge Employees (Core knowledge) Ideal: Commitment based PharmaCo: **Technicians**
Low Uniqueness	Contract Workers (Ancillary knowledge) Ideal: Compliance based HR PharmaCo: **Operators**	Job-Based Employees (Compulsory Knowledge) \ Ideal: Productivity based HR PharmaCo: **Supervisors**
	Low Strategic Value	**High Strategic Value**

Source: adapted from Lepak and Snell (2002, p. 520).